

IV. Land Use

A. Vision

Bel Air's regional accessibility and centrality, existing infrastructure, civic role as the County seat and its historic character have all rendered Bel Air a suitable and desirable location for the concentration of development.

The degree of development concentration in Bel Air is a delicate question of balance. Some of the greatest assets of the Town – its accessibility, small town charm, historic structures, and single family neighborhoods for example – are all vulnerable to an over-concentration of development. The recommendations of this Element seek to strike the right balance, one that will sustain the Town's strengths and address its problems over the next decade and stress the importance of retaining Bel Air's identity as the County seat.

B. Background

1. Trends: Annexation 1995-2001

Between the last Comprehensive Plan of 1995 and this one of 2002, Bel Air has grown modestly in size through several annexations (see Table IV-1). The primary annexations of the past six years were for commercial and institutional purposes, and Bel Air is now approximately 1,869 acres or 2.9 square miles in area.

TABLE IV-1
Bel Air Annexations 1995-2001

RESOLUTION #	DATE	PROPERTY	ACREAGE	LAND USE DESIGNATION
97	1996	Dombroskie	.585	Residential
98	1996	Boulton Group Limited Partnership	2.504	Commercial
99	1997	Harford Properties (Mojzisek Property)	.869	Commercial
100	1997	Town of Bel Air – 501 Churchville Rd	5.444	Institutional
101	1997	Vaughn/Heritage Auto Group	3.667	Commercial
103	1999	Upper Chesapeake	14.681	Institutional
104	1999	Schillinger Estate	1.047	Commercial

Note: All annexations have been conditioned on no special treatment as to taxes or services. Zoning designation was determined at the time of annexation and all development must comply with all Development Regulations requirements.

2. Current Status

a. Land Use

Because Bel Air is the County's government and commercial center and is embedded at the crossroads of the northern end of the County's development envelope, the Town cannot be viewed in isolation. Map IV-1 shows existing land use in Bel Air and land use in an area within one mile of the Town's boundaries (the Greater Bel Air Area - GBA) and Table IV-2 quantifies these acreages. The table shows that, in percentage terms, the Town has a similar proportion of townhouses and more multi-family than the Greater Bel Air Area and a much greater percentage of developed commercial and institutional lands.

Land Use categories are defined as follows:

LDR - Low Density Residential - Properties in this category are primarily single family detached houses at densities of no more than 4 units per acre. This designation also includes some community service uses and institution uses.

MDR - Medium Density Residential - Properties in this category are generally single family houses or attached units, such as townhouses and semi-detached dwellings. Again, the category includes community service uses and some institutional uses. Density is limited to no more than 5 units per acre.

HDR - High Density Residential - Properties in this category include apartments and condominiums, as well as community service uses and institutional uses. The density permitted in this district may not exceed 14 units per acre.

COM - Commercial - This category includes business, institutional and service establishments located in the B-1, B-2 and B-3 districts in the Town. Development intensity is based on zoning, setback and parking requirements.

IND - Industrial - Properties in this category include those engaging in manufacturing, processing, creating, repairing, renovating, cleaning or assembly of goods, merchandise or equipment.

INST – Institutional – This category includes uses such as schools, post offices, health care facilities, churches and community centers.

OS – Open Space – Properties in this category include both passive and active recreational space.

UND – Undeveloped – Properties in this category include vacant land that may or may not be developable, but does not qualify for open space, since properties are held under private ownership.

TABLE IV-2
Land Use in Bel Air & Greater Bel Air

	TOWN	COUNTY
LDR (Low Density Residential)	581.6 ac @ 36.2%	4273.7 ac @ 58.5%
MDR (Medium Density Residential)	43.3ac @ 2.7%	393.0 ac @ 5.4%
HDR (High Density Residential)	112.5 ac @ 7.0%	34.5 ac @ .5%
COM (Commercial)	336.6 ac @ 20.9%	215.1 ac @ 2.9%
IND (Industrial)	20.4 ac @ 1.3%	0
INST (Institutional)	308.1 ac @ 19.2%	315.8 ac @ 4.3%
OS (Open Space)	139.0 ac @ 8.6%	1059.5 @ 14.5%
UND (Undeveloped)	63.0 ac @ 3.9%	1015.4 @ 13.9%

b. Zoning

Table IV-3 quantifies the current zoning in Bel Air. Map IV-3 and Table IV-4 show the vacant lands in Town by general zoning category. The most significant vacant categories are in commercially zoned areas.

TABLE IV-3
Bel Air Zoning by Acreage

Acreage by Zoning District	
R-1	592.5
R-2	266.5
R-3	248.1
R-O	31.2
B-1	17.9
B-2	76.8
B-3	305.9
M-1	68.9
Total Acreage: 1607.8 acres/2.51 square miles. *An additional .4 square miles of right-of-way acreage results in total Town size of 2.9 square miles	

TABLE IV-4
Undeveloped Acreage by Zoning Category

Undeveloped Acreage by Zoning	
R-1	10.45
R-2	7.43
R-3	6.45
R-O	0
B-1	2.35
B-2	5.77
B-3	24.54
M-1	7.49

The character of the Town's Route 1 and Route 24 commercial corridors is distinctly suburban, i.e. large boxes, large areas of parking, wide highways, etc. In contrast, old Bel Air, the original Town Center, presents a very different picture. This is a pedestrian friendly area of professional offices, government buildings, shops and restaurants centered around the County Courthouse and ringed by residential neighborhoods.

3. Visual Character

Bel Air boasts a walkable scale with the center of old Bel Air easily accessible by many of its residential neighborhoods. The continuous grid

of streets allows easy walking and bicycling to the old core area. This accounts for the very high percentage of workers (19% to 22%) who walk to their jobs from the close-by neighborhoods. The adjacency of two and three story old Bel Air to quiet, tree-lined single family neighborhoods is one of the most striking and valued contrasts in Town.

The historic core of the Town Center is lined with continuous, close-knit facades of Main Street and some side streets providing a charm and consistency of scale. Further to the north, along Rockspring Road/Route 924 and Hickory Avenue, the main north/south entrance roads into Town are lined with single family homes. Many have been converted to commercial uses but still retain a small town residential character. Also marking some of the entry routes into Town are several major, permanent open space settings, such as the Heavenly Waters Park, Bel Air Memorial Gardens, Rockfield Park, and the rural edge in the County, east of Moores Mill Road.

Along and in between the gridded street pattern of Main Street and Hickory Avenue are homes renovated as law offices, the Courthouse, Town and County municipal buildings, the central library and several schools and restaurants. The Town also has several strong identifiers which are less positive. These include the unrelieved expanse of strip retail along Route 1 - with limited visual amenities, architectural cohesion or consistent scale - as well as overhead utilities and a jumble of competing signage. These factors contribute to an unpleasant arrival along Route 1.

Lying in between the positive and negative characteristics described above are some transitional, fragile situations that are undergoing redevelopment such as Route 1, South Main Street and the Town Center or are likely to do so over the next ten years. These areas may have extensive surface parking, functionally obsolete structures and uses, or the beginnings of conversion from residential to commercial uses. Their careful management and design is a particular challenge in this planning effort. These are addressed under the Specific Actions in this Land Use Element.

Alternatively, the Route 24 corridor, which was developed in the 1990s, using an overlay district approach, provides an attractive commercial entrance, blending the new development with the older development within the Town. The use of low profile signage, high quality landscaping and architectural controls, help to create a design consistency and provide unifying elements for the corridor.

In general, a key goal of this element is to capitalize on the positive characteristics of the Town, mitigate or overcome the negative ones and shape transitional areas into areas of positive character.

C. Issues and Problems

Bel Air is a multi-faceted community, comprised of generally close knit residential neighborhoods surrounding the old town center commercial district. Strip commercial development line Route 1 and Route 24, along with a major medical complex in the Route 24 corridor. While each of these areas is distinctive, each is inter-connected with the surrounding community. This interdependence highlights certain issues and problems related to Town development. For example, the Town Center governmental complex and the medical complex provide a strong economic engine for the community. They also, along with the strip commercial development, create significant traffic congestion and circulation problems that impact nearby neighborhoods. To balance these conflicts, land use decisions need to include mechanisms to minimize traffic congestion, provide alternative transportation options, such as bike and pedestrian trails and improved transit, and assure the adequacy of parking facilities within the community.

The Town Center has traditionally been the heart of the community, providing a wide variety of services and entertainment facilities. With the increased development in the Route 1 and Route 24 corridors, both within the Town and outside of its boundaries, Bel Air needs to focus on maintaining the viability of the Town Center as a primary service and entertainment area. Nearby residential areas need to be monitored carefully to assure adequate maintenance of aging neighborhoods and to preserve threatened historical properties.

While these issues of maintaining the stability of existing neighborhoods and commercial areas is of paramount importance, the Town must also be conscious of new development impacts and needs. New development will generally take the form of redevelopment of existing property. This presents potential for both positive and negative impacts on the community. The challenge will be to assure that new development minimizes increased traffic congestion and impacts on local services, such as schools, parks, water and sewer facilities and overall public safety facilities.

The Town should investigate the possibility of enhancing the community's visual appearance through the use of architectural guidelines and encouraging specific uses that will enhance the long term viability of the community. These would include entertainment facilities to generate life in the downtown on the evenings and weekends, medical facilities that compliment the existing hospital complex, mixed use retail and commercial in the Town Center area to minimize the impacts on traffic and congestion, encouragement of overnight accommodations and development of senior housing opportunities in close proximity to Bel Air.

These uses have been identified as lacking within the community and may be achieved to some extent through redevelopment. However, they may also require annexation.

By State law, the Town's annexation potential is limited to properties immediately adjacent to its boundaries. Since most of the properties located in this area are already developed, this option provides limited opportunities at best. Any annexation that is considered should be evaluated in terms of advantages and disadvantages to the municipality. The growth opportunities should be weighed carefully to assure a sound fiscal base and to minimize potential ramifications of annexation in terms of social, economic and physical impacts on the community.

D. Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: Preserve town character and identity of Bel Air in an increasingly urban Harford County setting

Objectives:

- A. Identify and enhance Bel Air's existing assets
- B. Identify land use needs and potential opportunities to insure optimum quality of future development
- C. Identify mechanisms and tools necessary to provide long-term quality development and attractive public space

Goal 2: Preserve the appearance and integrity of the Town's residential neighborhoods

Objectives:

- A. Minimize intrusion of commercial uses in neighborhoods
- B. Protect, maintain and improve existing housing stock and neighborhoods
- C. Assure compatibility of new residential development

Goal 3: Protect environmentally sensitive areas

Objective:

- A. Encourage the protection of environmentally sensitive areas by providing flexible zoning, developing educational

initiatives and adopting a pro-active approach to preservation of these assets

Goal 4: Streamline the development process

Objective:

- A. Determine possible methods for streamlining the development process while assuring retention of public participation in the development process
- B. Determine methods to make the development process more user friendly

Goal 5: Achieve quality growth and development of the Town

Objectives:

- A. Provide for logical, fiscally sound growth through annexation, development and re-development
- B. Recognize existing development patterns and provide for appropriate expansion that is compatible with Harford County's Land Use Plan
- C. Support annexations which will improve the Town's quality of life and/or be economically beneficial to the community

Goal 6: Strengthen coordination of planning efforts with the County

Objectives:

- A. Work with the County to encourage Smart Growth initiatives, such as promoting infill development and redevelopment rather than expansion of development areas; supporting industrial and business development in the Town; and maximizing use of existing infrastructure.
- B. Form partnerships with the County to coordinate land use policies and to assure adequate public facilities necessary for planned development
- C. Participate in the County's Master Plan Update process

Goal 7: Coordinate land uses with the transportation system

Objectives:

- A. Encourage efficient Land Uses that support bike, pedestrian and transit use
- B. Interconnect mixed uses and encourage design concepts to support this coordination to ease transition between mixed uses

Goal 8: Create a satisfactory visual and functional balance between pressures for new development and pressures for conservation

Objectives:

- A. Increase and ensure open space and recreational opportunities for all new and existing developments
- B. Enhance the image and sense of arrival to the Town at the approaches
- C. Ensure the compatibility of renovated structures and new developments within the existing environment
- D. Preserve the Town's positive physical attributes and improve the visual quality and image
- E. Emphasize redevelopment of vacant and underutilized parcels
- F. Provide adequate open space and park areas throughout the community

Goal 9: Upgrade the appearance of the Town's commercial/industrial district

Objectives:

- A. Upgrade existing substandard areas
- B. Ensure attractive compatible designs in new developments

Goal 10: Retain the Town Center as the historic core of the community

Objective:

- A. Reinforce the image of the Town Center as the people oriented, commercial, social, cultural, educational and recreational focal point of the Town of Bel Air
- B. Encourage development of entertainment facilities in the Town Center, i.e. movie theater, community cultural center, restaurants

E. Specific Actions

The Proposed Land Use Plan (Map IV-4) depicts future land use projects and provides the basis for future zoning designations. This map differs from the Existing Land Use (Map IV-1) by correlating the land use with zoning rather than depicting the current use of the property. The 2002 Proposed Land Use Plan adds a "mixed use" designation. Properties with this designation are suitable for Residential Office Zoning. Other changes include the following:

- Modification of parcels on Alice Anne Street from residential to commercial to reflect current zoning designation
- Modification of land use designation on former sewing factory on Williams Street from industrial to commercial to more accurately reflect current and proposed use
- Inclusion of parcels on south side of Fulford Avenue between Barnes Street and Maitland Street in the Town Center Overlay District
- Inclusion of the commercial parcels at the southwest intersection of Baltimore Pike and Kenmore Avenue in the Town Center Overlay District
- Inclusion of the properties on the west side of South Main Street from Tolchester Lane, south to the Town boundary as commercial, with the intent of including these properties as part of the B-1 Limited Business District in the future

The following section lists the actions necessary to implement the land use and physical improvements shown on the maps.

1. Develop an annexation policy outlining initiatives and incentives to encourage annexation of properties meeting the Town's land use goals.

Any annexation should be based on a number of considerations: sound fiscal and economic benefits; protecting and enhancing the character of the Town; managing development impacts effectively; and maintaining a beneficial balance of residential, commercial and open space.

Map IV-6 identifies some potential annexation sites adjacent to the Town that may meet the Town's growth and development goals.

Incentives to property owners for annexation typically include the following:

- Availability of Town water and/or sewer
- Simpler development process and time frame
- Possibility of different zoning designation in Town

The identified properties are as follows:

- a. Property A, north of Vale Road, is a candidate for a future employment park, given this Plan's proposal for a Vale Road/US 1 Bypass interchange. Such a connection would place Parcel A and adjacent lands in an excellent location to add to the Town and County's economic base.
- b. Property B, the Cameron property (on Tollgate Road) could provide an ideal site for a continuing care retirement community, hotel/conference center or neo-traditional development. Any use should be clustered to maximize the site's natural amenities.
- c. Property C, located at the northwest quadrant of Route 24 and Route 1, is developed as a retail establishment. This property is at a highly visible location and its redevelopment for other commercial uses would be beneficial to the Town. Redevelopment of this property would require a connection to the Town's sewer system.

- d. Property D, located at the northeast quadrant of Kelly Avenue and Winding Alley (between Route 1 and Boulton Street), is currently developed with residential uses. This site is not likely to be annexed if the existing uses remain.
 - e. Property E, Del Plaza, is a shopping center located at the intersection of Hickory Avenue and Moores Mill Road. The property's function and appearance significantly impacts the adjacent Town properties and roadways. Annexation would benefit the Town by providing an upgrade in appearance and some Town control of the development.
 - f. Property F, the St. Matthews Church parcel on Route 22, is a candidate for annexation. It would provide land for the Bynum trail connection, additional passive open space and potential for some additional land to meet identified senior housing needs.
2. Encourage development or redevelopment of vacant and underutilized commercial and industrial parcels through marketing and incentive programs.
 3. Influence future development by leveraging Town and County owned land to achieve the Town's development goals.
 4. Evaluate potential for redevelopment of parcels between George Street and Route 1.
 5. Support Bel Air Downtown Revitalization Alliance efforts to improve the function and development pattern of the old downtown core.
 6. Develop a parking structure or deck to serve the western area of Town along Bond Street.
 7. Develop design concepts to encourage efficient land use that supports bike and pedestrian access from the neighborhoods to nearby parks and commercial areas, eg. continuation of the Ma and Pa Trail, the Plumtree Trail and the Bynum Trail.
 8. Re-evaluate zoning of South Main Street properties to determine appropriate zoning in light of current uses and surrounding neighborhood.
 9. Encourage development of industrial uses that will complement the hospital complex.

10. Evaluate revolving land purchase program to secure critical properties and resell with conditions to assure desired development.
11. Evaluate zoning change from industrial to commercial for fringe properties in industrial districts adjacent to residential districts while stressing the importance of effecting an appropriate balance between new development and conservation of existing uses.
12. Establish an Architectural Review Board to help preserve the appearance of the downtown.
13. Evaluate incentive options, such as density bonuses, to encourage quality architectural design.
14. Evaluate height limitation impacts and potential floating zone legislation to encourage desirable uses that may be constricted by current height limits. For clarification, a floating zone, an unmapped zoning district, where all the zone requirements are contained in the Development Regulations and the zone is fixed on the map, only when an application for development meeting the zoning requirements is approved.
15. Develop legislation and policies that minimize the impact of commercial development on neighborhoods, i.e. noise/nuisance legislation, improved property maintenance legislation.
16. Develop incentives to establish buffers between residential and commercial/industrial zones and transitional land uses, thereby, avoiding a domino effect of commercial uses.
17. Develop incentives to encourage construction of bed and breakfast or other lodging facilities.

F. Interjurisdictional Coordination Measures

Land use is one of the most sensitive issues affecting local governments. Coordination and regular interaction between the Town and the County is essential to providing citizens with necessary services and to meeting the goals identified in this Plan. The Town should work closely with the County to implement the measures noted below and to complement the land use initiatives of each jurisdiction.

1. Coordinate development initiatives with all appropriate federal, state and county agencies.

2. Actively support continuation of the Intergovernmental Smart Growth Task Force.
3. Develop a Memorandum of Understanding outlining the Town/County Smart Growth policy regarding growth initiatives and land use coordination.
4. Coordinate Town and County land use review and approvals with appropriate Harford County agencies.
5. Initiate interagency policies to encourage redevelopment of existing, underutilized commercial parcels in lieu of expanding commercial zoning.
6. Work with Harford County on land use and development plans for the Fallston/Route 1 corridor to assure coordination and compatible development.
7. Encourage compatible residential and commercial zoning and land uses in County areas in the Greater Bel Air area and Route 1/Route 22 corridors.
8. Encourage retention of Federal, State and County facilities within the downtown core.
9. Work with the County on future plans for County office consolidation, relocation or redevelopment to enhance the Town's core, facilitate planning for parking, etc.
10. Work with the Board of Education and the County on expansion and retention of the Bel Air High and Middle Schools.